

Eric Berlin's Workshop

Get Down! (Descent with Intent - Part 2)

In my last article (Issue 68), I suggest we would serve students better by beginning them in the upper register instead of low. Read that, if you haven't yet, to see where I am coming from. I understand the impracticality of re-writing method books and the canon of elementary band repertoire, so my hope with these two articles is to share ideas that have helped me and my students build more a more efficient approach.

One of the invaluable things I gleaned from my mentor Charles Schlueter is that we revert to our dominant habits unless we are otherwise actively involved. With this in mind, reflect on how long you have been using the same warm-up. I started on those first two beginner pitches of concert Bb and F at the bottom of the staff for about twenty years. Beginning each day with habits originating in fourth grade, was it any wonder that my high C was a physical struggle? That struggle was at times so extreme that a friend named it "the Berlin crunch"! Reinforcing habits of our beginner days with mindless repetition is a surefire way to ensure that we "revert to fourth grade" when under stress. Luckily, even though I would have preferred to learn it earlier, about ten years out of school, I was able to make some fundamental changes that have made all the difference.

Two people came to my rescue. First Chris Still, my practice buddy who is now in the Los Angeles Philharmonic, called my attention to excess body movement and got me studying Alexander Technique. This brought awareness to excess effort in my playing about which



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I had been completely clueless. Second, I started studying with Vincent Penzarella who shaped my understanding of embouchure by setting high C as neutral. Minimizing excess movement and shifting home base to high C from low allowed me to take my playing to the next level. Having stated the problem, here are a few concepts to gradually bring things together.

Bring your High Register Set to the Low register

"...even when it starts with a low note, one's lips should always be put on the mouthpiece as though the piece begins with a high note. Low notes are obtained just as well this way, but it does not work both ways."

Merri Franquin

I found this in the new translation of Merri Franquin's method from qPress. For orchestral trumpeters in the US, Franquin is especially important, even if few know his name. He is our link to his teacher, Arban through his student Georges Mager who taught such notable names as Adolph Herseth, William Vacchiano and Roger Voisin during his tenure as Principal Trumpet of the Boston Symphony from 1919-1950. This method from a century ago feels very much ahead of its time in many ways. I recommend checking it out.

Vince's "high C home base" caused me to re-think my approach to warm-up. I have written more about this in previous articles, so I will not go into depth except to say that I start softly in the upper register, with a lips only "p" release and descend slurred with the same set and return to the upper register. It is important to note that a "p" release is really a release of air using the lips instead of the tongue as the valve, not blowing harder until the sound begins.

This approach assures that the air is forward at the lips, not stuck in the throat.

I suggest that my students practice scales and arpeggios "upside down"; begin at the top (softer is better), slur down one or two octaves and then return. This sets the face for the upper register and helps familiarize us with how the low register feels with a smaller aperture. For students who have difficulty starting at the top above the staff, beginning in the middle, ascending to the top, descending to the bottom and returning to the middle is a good bridge. If it is difficult to re-ascend, the student has passively collapsed the body's support structures in order to descend instead of actively "singing" the descending pitches with their lips.

In my warm-up and these scale and arpeggio exercises, I am careful to observe my body and isolate movement to the singing muscles at the corners of the embouchure. Watch your bell. Does it go up and down with the contour of the scale? If so, this indicates body tension or "support" changes with register. Try again with your eyes locked on a spot just above the bell on the far side of the room. If you still have trouble re-ascending to the upper register, minimize jaw movement by tucking a mute under your chin and hold it there. This will help isolate movement to the corners that should move forward down the angle of the leadpipe instead of open and down.

Approach the Trumpet as a Fretless String Instrument

My former colleague and tubist extraordinaire Matt Gaunt used what he called "The Stupid Exercise" for his students. Simple glissandos from the highest register to the low register and



Adolphe 'Bud' Herseth.



William Vacchiano.

back on the mouthpiece. The goal was to eliminate breaks in the buzz. What some assume are “natural breaks” in the buzz are simply the result of passive collapse. This usually happens for trumpeters between the G and C on the staff. If done slowly enough, one can sense the approaching habitual break. At that point, slow down even more and really insist on keeping connected with the glissando. This will force you to maintain your air support and use corners to go forward to descend instead.

An added benefit of using the glissando is that we avoid the feeling of “elevator floors” or “frets” for each pitch. The physical “feel” approach is cumbersome and inefficient as we may get to what feels like the pitch we want, but then must adjust up or down to be in tune. Advanced students and professionals understand that playing in tune is not something we can do with a tuner. Yes it is a great reference to get us close, but even with a strictly obeyed reference of A=440, depending on key, any given note can vary as much as 40 cents to be in tune! Living in the real world, that variation is much wider! Buzzing glissandi with drones, we can really fine-tune the connection to our singing muscles, calibrating them to respond precisely to the pitch signal given by the ears.

With both the descending scale and “stupid” exercises, the goal is to bring the high register set to the lower register. Once you have reached the bottom, observe the feel of the embouchure in contrast to what it feels like to begin on these pitches in your old warm-up. The ultimate intent of all of this work is to be able to begin low register pitches from this new position.

Bridging this approach to the trumpet can be difficult for some. Buzzing aids, which allow you to buzz while holding the horn in normal playing position, are indispensable. Also, since I teach left hand buzzing, retaining the left hand hold on the mouthpiece, we can get a similar sensation while actually playing.

Support is for Low Notes

This is another “upside down” idea. In one of my first lessons, another bit of wisdom from Charlie really turned my brain around. He asked a simple question: “Is the highest note always the most important note of the line? No, then why do you play that way?” Often the high note is the peak, but more often than not, our peak dynamic in the high register is more a result of physical effort than a deliberate musical choice.

We all know the “Thank goodness” sigh of relief once we have hit the “money note” above the staff, which collapses our body as we descend. Here in the US, we have



Merri Franquin.

a famous commercial for a medical alert system for the elderly where a woman says: “Help! I have fallen and I can’t get up!” This is a perfect way to describe the problem with descending in a passive way which makes returning to the upper register difficult or impossible.

Many exercises in the Schlossberg book address this by indicating a crescendo as the scale descends. This counteracts the tendency to collapse as we descend which makes it easier for us to return to where we started. Especially with a new higher set, it will be important to consciously keep the intensity of the air constant from high to low.

Brass musicians we admire maintain intensity throughout a line as a violinist with a bow in constant motion. This is a result of constant musical engagement. Making an active musical decision in every moment is challenging and what separates true masters from the rest. We can however learn the feeling of constant support as we continue to strive for better active music making

Voice teachers give this feeling to their students by pushing against them as they sing. This also works for brass players. Making them push back doesn’t allow a passive collapse. Alone, we can get similar results by standing on one leg or sitting with our feet lifted parallel to the floor to keep the core muscles engaged. It is important to understand that the benefit is not in the added tension, but rather that whatever support is there remains constant, regardless of register.

Release Pressure to Allow the Lips to Move

If the corners are to move the lips forward, it is important that the mouthpiece float on top of the lips instead of being anchored against the teeth. One of the common misconceptions about brass

playing technique is that the bell should be parallel to the ground. Here in the US, much of this comes from the need for visual uniformity in marching bands. What this fails to take into account is that people are not uniform!

Vincent Penzarella gave me a great way to find the appropriate horn angle for each individual. Biting a pencil between the front teeth with the jaw at rest will show the angle which is perpendicular to the plane of our teeth. Those with an overbite will aim the pencil down (the vast majority of us) and those with an underbite will aim up. Differences in tooth shape can also influence whether we should aim a little left or right as well. Finding this ideal angle for the leadpipe is a vital part of initial setup that is usually skipped, handicapping students from the beginning.

Even if your embouchure is properly set up, with the lead pipe angle appropriate for your unique teeth formation, you may still hamper the movement of the lips with the “secure” feeling of the mouthpiece on your lips. It can be helpful to gently “pull” the horn away as you descend to feel it the appropriate movement at first. In most cases the top lip takes more abuse, so you can slightly angle your instrument downward to do the same. Understanding that pressure is a symptom of inadequate resistance at the embouchure, where we “squish the donut” to make the hole smaller, awareness of pressure can help us bring the aperture closer

Don’t Miss The Point!

I am fond of golf psychology and there is one important concept that applies to us as brass players. The point of golf is not to have a perfect swing, but rather to get the ball into the hole. The noted golf psychologist Bob Rotella says about the golf swing “train it on the practice tee but trust it on the course”. Without a clear idea of where you want the ball to go, a perfect golf swing is useless. It is the clear picture of where a golfer wants the ball to go paired with the confidence of a good swing that creates spectacular performances on the professional tour.

In the same way, the goal of trumpet playing is not to have a perfect set-up. The goal of refining our technique is to serve the music in the most efficient way. Attention to technique is important in the practice room to build new habits that we can rely on in performance. All of these changes will eventually work themselves into your playing once they become your dominant habit. Ultimately, the dominant thought while performing must be your ideal sound. Clear musical intention can power through flawed technique, but as we refine our technique it becomes more immediate and responsive. This opens up new realms of possibilities for expression.